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A Buyers' Guide to Branch Campuses?

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A Buyers' Guide to Branch Campuses?

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GLOBAL: A buyers' guide to branch campuses

Alan Ruby and Adriana Jaramillo* [University World News](#) 02 October 2011 Issue No: 191

Ministers of education in developing economies around the globe are trying to make sense of the growth of university branch campuses. Their neighbors and competitors have them, local citizens seem to want them as an alternative to sending their children abroad, they might be cheaper than large-scale scholarship programmes like the King Abdullah grants, and they could underpin research and development facilities.

There are clearly willing partners, established universities interested in creating and supporting campuses in other countries. So what should a potential buyer look for in a branch campus?

There is a lot of noise in the marketplace, with openings and closings, announcements and pronouncements and all sorts of different terms and rationales bandied around. And there is serious money involved as well as reputations to be kept, made or lost. Policy-makers with competing demands for their time need some tools or stratagems to deal with the whirl of competing claims and opportunities.

Three simple rules may help. First, be clear about what you want to buy. Second, establish what is actually being sold and, third, make sure there is an after-sales service agreement.

Rule one: Clarify what you want to buy

The easiest way to do this is by establishing what branch campuses can and cannot do for the host nation. Branch campuses can:

☐ Diversify provision by offering academic programmes that are not available in the region, especially in areas of specialisation or where cost structures justify centralisation of infrastructure, like medicine or robotics.

☐ Internationalise higher education by linking the local academic community to the global community of scholars and educators.

☐ Transfer knowledge and expertise about teaching, learning and research, and the design and operation of modern world class universities.

☐ Attract and retain talent in the student, faculty and research communities.

☐ Model new and innovative policies and practices in the operation of universities and of modern corporations, from boards of trustees to procurement procedures.

☐ Exemplify values like free speech, democratic practice, tolerance and equality.

Branch campuses cannot absorb demand from a growing youth population or an aspiring middle-class. Nor can they attract significant amounts of foreign direct investment into higher education. While they can have some impact on the margin of these issues, a branch campus typically does not have the scale to fully satisfy demand or to attract substantial capital.

Branch campuses are not nationwide reform strategies for systems of higher education. They can be observable examples of good practice and opportunities to learn. The very existence of a branch campus can motivate other academic communities, inspire reform and create competition, leading others to improved practice.

In a way branch campuses are like the old lighthouse or laboratory school model of reform. But this model requires action on the part of the host nation to make the operational basis of the branch campus transparent and open to all who might benefit. It assumes there needs to be an active strategy to disseminate, replicate, operate and evaluate good practices.

Without these strategies, branch campuses can become 'asylums', protected places serving only a few, with no connection with the surrounding community and no wider impact or public benefit.

Rule two: Check what is actually being sold

There is a growing array of transnational higher education arrangements and all are referred to as 'branch campuses' even though they differ in breadth of academic programming, in governance and in financing.

The main distinguishing feature among branch campuses is the extent of operational control over academic programmes, standards and faculty that is held and exercised by the home institution. The tighter the control of student admissions and faculty recruitment, and the closer the alignment of standards for selection, the stronger the role of the home campus and the less opportunity for local variation.

The portal model followed by New York University-Abu Dhabi is clearly the most tightly aligned system, with common standards in both locations. Partnerships and memoranda of understanding are much more loosely coupled, reflecting an expressed desire to work together.

Be clear about what is being offered and how it will be delivered.

Will the branch offer an academic experience identical to that of the home campus? Will the entrance and graduation requirements be the same? Will the faculty be held to the same standards for recruitment, retention and promotion? Will the faculty be resident for the academic year or will they come in two-week blocks? Will the degree have the home brand or carry some geographic endorsement?

In addition to these academic matters, a minister or a government must also protect potential student consumers. That can be done in part through the due diligence that goes with any normal commercial transaction.

Is the vendor reliable, reputable and recognised in the wider academic

community? Is the vendor financially stable and able to sustain a major development programme? Is the vendor experienced in cross-border programmes? Does the vendor have competitors? And are they operating successfully in other locations? Do they have the capacity to establish and sustain another location?

And as well as looking after the individual interests, the minister must consider national or sovereign interests. What is the fit between the proposed branch campus and the objectives and sovereign needs of the nation? For example, does it contribute to the attainment of national development goals such as the improvement of dry land agricultural productivity or widening of access to health services? Does it acknowledge language and cultural requirements associated with national identity?

These are difficult questions as they touch on academic freedom and institutional independence, hallmarks of modern universities. But these principles are not in conflict with a nation's right to guide and shape the direction of future economic and social development or its responsibility to protect citizens through appropriate regulation such as academic accreditation and recognition of qualifications.

Nations and states around the world set different types of sovereign requirements or regulations. For example, some US states have differential fees for out-of-state students and some set quotas on the number of 'outsiders' who can attend public institutions or particular programmes.

Developing nations can reasonably set some sovereign requirements to maximise the benefits of their investments in higher education without intruding on the academic independence of partners.

Rule three: Make sure there is 'after sales service'

After sales service agreements usually involve regularly scheduled maintenance,

guarantees on key components and low cost or free repairs. All specified in the terms of sale with agreed milestones of elapsed time or usage.

The parallel in the academic community is quality assurance and accreditation. Quality assurance is a process that ensures that the integrity and standards of academic programmes are maintained over time, and that the qualifications and credentials awarded have currency, meaning and value in the global labor market and are recognised by other academics.

Quality assurance can be focused on the internal processes of an institution, its admission and progression standards, its academic integrity policies, its faculty promotion and retention policies, its course development and approval processes and its requirements for the award of degrees and diplomas.

These should be well-documented and subject to peer review and external validation by agencies, like institutions and leaders in the relevant academic disciplines. These reviews are at the heart of many accreditation processes that recognise programmes that meet the necessary standards and offer institutions advice on how to improve performance.

It is not unreasonable for a host nation to expect these sorts of requirements to be readily met. Policies and processes of quality assurance and accreditation are almost certainly followed by the home institution and should apply to a branch campus. Indeed they are hallmarks of world-class institutions.

Combined these three rules will reduce or forestall 'buyer remorse', that sense of anxiety or regret that follows large-scale or expensive purchases. They might not be equal to "your money will be cheerfully refunded if you're not completely satisfied", but the three rules offer a measure of comfort and certainty in difficult times.